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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by VIVAT International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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* E/CN.6/2006/1.

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Statement

VIVAT International (VIVAT) follows with great interest the progress made on women's issues, and firmly believes that gender equality is the key to development. We note the increasing role of women in all aspects of life through the years and congratulate the international community/member states/NGOs in taking bold steps in promoting gender equality. From our experience in working with women in 62 countries cutting across all the continents we see that the progress made is far from satisfactory. Indeed, not only does poverty wear the face of a woman but also the victim of injustice is invariably a woman.

As Secretary General Kofi Annan said in his opening address at the Beijing +5, "...women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of poverty, illiteracy, ill health, malnutrition and violence". We believe it is still true today. If we are to collectively address the issues of poverty and injustice, we should start with women and their empowerment.

As the Beijing declaration puts it: "We are convinced that women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace"– Beijing Platform for Action (BPA no. 13). It means not only equal opportunities in the workplace and at home, but also in society as a whole. It demands true democratization of the political, social and cultural spheres. The unique inputs of women are vital for full attainment of the goals of equality, development and peace. Beijing +5 adds the important role of men: "men must involve themselves and take joint responsibility with women for promotion of gender equality" (BPA no. 6).

VIVAT emphasizes that acknowledgement of women's crucial contribution to society is an important ingredient for gender equality. Most of their economic and domestic contribution goes unnoticed. For example, their work "at home" whether monetized or not is largely ignored. In the work place, their exclusion from higher education results in their lack of managerial qualifications. Indigenous women often face barriers both as women and as members of indigenous communities. The sad reality is, the persistent and increasing burden of unemployment are placed on women. The BPA states: "One fourth of all households worldwide are headed by women and many other households are dependent on female income even where men are present" (BPA no. 22). They are key contributors to the community and in the workplace.

We agree with this Commission that education is crucial for examining gender equality. BPA states that as many as 113 million children do not attend school and two-thirds of illiterate people are women (BPA no. 263). Beijing +5 found that little progress has been made in combating illiteracy in developing countries (no. 10). Our on-the-ground experience confirms these. Universal primary and secondary education is the first key to gender equality.

Poverty hits women the most. It prevents them from being dynamic and assertive of their rights. The worsening economic crisis in many countries lessens the capabilities of women to be involved in productive economic activities. We renew our call for poverty eradication as crucial to equitable and gender sensitive development. In order to achieve this, we urge member states to give primary importance to the concerns of women and children in combating poverty. We need national strategies both for developed countries to meet their ODA targets and for developing countries to look for innovative financing for development and to directly fund programs for the eradication of poverty. Debt relief to the least developed countries (LDCs) must be granted to give these countries the breathing space they need. But the key to sustainable economic growth is fair and just trade. In all this, women should play a central role in development and decision-making. Gender equality is key to development.

We call on governments to enact policies for full human development, not only market development. Social services are not an "expense" but a necessity and the right of all human beings. We support initiatives promoting alternatives to big business like small-scale enterprises for women through Microcredit. Our grassroots experiences have shown that women are good at taking "economic risks". Some of our successful Microcredit programs are with women.

VIVAT notes with alarm the growing threat against migrant women. More and more migrant women are not only separated from their families but also traumatized by inhumane labor conditions and are exposed to violence and abuses from their employers. We join NGOs and Civil Society in calling on all governments to address this growing problem.

VIVAT welcomes

- Initiative generated by this commission on choosing women and development and women and decision-making to assess progress made and lessons learned.
- Initiatives derived from holding the UN International Year of Microcredit 2005 stressing the pressing need to build inclusive financial sectors for development.
- Soon to be published Secretary General's study on Violence against Women.
- 2006 High Level Session on International Migration and Development.

VIVAT calls on

- The immediate implementation of Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3, and not to wait for 2015 and thus fulfill the promises made at the World Summit in 2000.
- All member states to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).
- To address the widespread armed conflicts and solutions based on militarization.
- Continuous efforts to fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic.
- International bodies like UN Commission on Population and Development, which provide disaggregated data on migration and other women issues, to see the real score.
- VIVAT urges all governments to institute mechanisms for dialogue and listen to women at the local, regional and national levels.

Conclusion

The key to genuine development, which includes poverty eradication, lies in having women play an equal role in policy making and its implementation. Recognizing their role in the development process, and preparing the women through proper education, adequate health facilities, and employment will go a long way in executing the plan of women's participation in development. A strong political will on the part of all stakeholders, including the political leaders, will enable both UN and the national governments to make this happen.